



DIOCESE OF FALL RIVER

REBUILDING IN FAITH AND HOPE

Introducing Strategic Planning

*A Letter from
Bishop Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V., D.D.,
to the Clergy, Religious and Faithful
of the
Diocese of Fall River*



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Dear Friends in Christ:

Last April, I wrote my first Pastoral Letter to all of you — our clergy and religious together with the members of Christ’s faithful — extending an invitation “to join me on a journey that will lead to the renewal and rebuilding of our Church, the Body of Christ alive in our midst.”

Here we are, almost one year later, and I am happy to share that our journey is well underway. We are celebrating some early successes of strategic planning for our Catholic



schools, launching a new Catholic Foundation, and the introduction of the *Good Leaders Good Shepherds* leadership program in support of our clergy.

Another success has been the completion of the work of the Task Force on Parishes as part of our Pastoral Planning.

These combined efforts have attracted broad support, have been diligent in purpose and outcome, and have surfaced new and renewed lay and clergy leadership. Many — clergy and laity alike — are now realizing greater opportunities as the Diocese begins life anew.

Based on this, and building on this energy, I believe

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the time is now to be expansive in tackling the challenges we face with faith-filled and innovative solutions. To accomplish this, we will begin a strategic planning process in the Diocese, and I am asking our priests and lay-faithful to become personally engaged in it.

Successful strategic planning will demand our collective assets — the wisdom, judgment, skills, commitment and aspirations of all members of our Diocesan Church. In short, we must forge a vision — and a plan — to move forward, together.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

“The Bishop must always foster missionary communion in his Diocesan Church, following the ideal of



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the first Christian communities, in which the believers were of one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4:32). To do so, he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. And yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and — above all — allowing the flock to strike out on new paths. In his mission of fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion, he will have to encourage and develop the means of participation ... out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear. Yet the principal aim of these participatory processes should not be ecclesiastical organization, but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.”

Pope Francis
Evangelii Gaudium

This “missionary aspiration of reaching everyone” is the work of strategic planning.

In today’s Church (indeed in the world of nonprofits in general) strategic planning is no longer hierarchical, top-down, or dictated by the opinions of one or a few. It is not imposed on us by outside experts; it is guided from within. It is not focused on our deficits, or what we have been doing wrong; rather it is built on our assets — the wisdom, judgment, talents, skills, passions, and aspirations of those within our Church community, clergy and laity.

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In short, we must figure this out together. When done well, strategic planning creates a special moment that can unite the local and larger Church in ways that have transformational impact — changing both the hearts of those who participate, and the lives of those served.

Mirroring my Pastoral Letter, I am calling this strategic planning process *Rebuilding in Faith and Hope*, focusing on three major goals: revitalizing our parishes; renewing the ministries of the Diocese; and strengthening support for clergy. A brief overview of each follows:

I. REVITALIZE OUR PARISHES

“With its universal and indispensable provisions, the



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program of the Gospel must continue to take root, as it has always done, in the life of the Church everywhere. It is in the local churches that the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan can be identified — goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources — which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people, mold communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture.”

Pope John Paul II
Novo Millenio Ineunte



The recently completed Pastoral Planning Report makes the recommendation that pastoral (parish) re-

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vitalization and parish planning teams be established in all parishes. It is important to note that the report



provides indicators as data points, to use as a tool in the decision-making but does not make specific recommendations.

This strategic planning proposal addresses the process that each parish will adopt prior to any decision about its future. Those decisions will be made with the advice and counsel of the individual parish revitalization teams, working in close and facilitated collaboration with other parishes.

This strategic planning is designed to engage clergy and laity in the decision-making process, so that they

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own the outcome – that they have invested themselves appropriately and meaningfully, and are able to make an informed and inspired judgment about the future of their parish.

Successful transition and change must be well managed, and this strategic planning proposal is an opportunity for forging a new vision, and creating a new plan, for the life-changing work of our parishes.

A strategic planning effort is getting started with a pilot group of 10-12 parishes. A step-by-step framework has been developed to guide each parish through this planning process to ensure wide consultation, a thorough assessment of all aspects of the parish, and the formulation of an action plan that is specific, measurable, and realistic. Facilitators from outside the par-



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ish will be on hand to assist.

Planning for the revitalization of parishes will also take place in the coming months with the creation of a Parish Revitalization Commission of lay people and clergy — whose task will be the evaluation of available parish evangelization and/or renewal programs. From their research, this committee will ultimately recommend 3-4 options for our parishes to choose from for their own revitalization. Some parishes may be ready to begin this effort as early as the fall of this year.

II. RENEW THE MINISTRIES OF THE DIOCESE

“Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm! (#80) Some fall into it because they throw themselves into unrealistic projects and are not satisfied simply to do what they reasonably can. Others, because they lack the patience to allow processes to mature; they want everything to fall from Heaven. Others, because they are attached to a few projects or vain dreams of success. Others, because they have lost real contact with people and so depersonalize their work that they are more concerned with the road map than with the journey itself.”

Pope Francis
Evangelii Gaudium

I would like to bring parishioners together to discern and plan for the mission of the Greater Church of Fall River — uniting them in spirit and action to accomplish ministry on their terms, with integrity, impact, and

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passion.

To do so requires a diocesan strategic planning process parallel to the parish planning that brings together clergy and lay people from all over the Diocese — the more, the better — to engage in specific ministries about which they are passionate and have much to share.

The purpose of “Renewing the Ministries of the Diocese” is to:

1. Forge a new vision out of the needs and aspirations of many, not just a few clergy or administrators.
2. Foster unity with the Bishop.
3. Support our pastors, to enable “priests to be priests.”
4. Listen to the concerns of our lay people.
5. Bring back those frustrated or fallen away from the Church.
6. Allow laity to contribute their considerable time and talent in meaningful and productive ways.
7. Find “positive deviants” — those with extraordinary passion and skill to do great things.
8. Engage clergy and laity in productive ways that show results.
9. Renew our mission to change lives.
10. Develop needed resources, financial and human.

This will begin with a representative body of the Diocese forming what we’re calling a Diocesan Ministry Planning Commission, which will oversee the process. Central to this process will be a series of regional “listening sessions” to be held at various parish locations.

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Parishioners will be invited to attend to express to me their hopes and dreams for our Church. My role along with that of the Planning Commission members, will be to listen.

It is my prayer that many will attend one of the following listening sessions, scheduled from 6:30-8:00 p.m., at the following parishes:

1. March 20 — St. Mary, Norton
2. March 21 — St. Ann, Raynham
3. April 5 — Christ the King, Mashpee
4. April 12 — St. Mary's Cathedral, Fall River
5. April 18 — St. Joan of Arc, Orleans
6. April 20 — St. Julie Billiart, North Dartmouth
7. April 23 — Our Lady of Victory, Centerville*

*(scheduled from 7:00 to 8:30 p.m.)

Examples of priority areas are often determined based on listening sessions. These may include:

- Parish Life — identifying those critical issues in the Spiritual and temporal life of the laity; to offer inspiring and practical methods and solutions as to how the Diocese can better support its parishes.

- Communications: Explore ways to bring the Diocese into the 21st century of communication including social media platforms, live streams, mobile communications, email broadcasting and effective database management.

- Vocations: Establish priorities for the campus ministries of the colleges and universities served by the Diocese. Create a board of directors for campus ministry and engage lay people in these outreach ministries.

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- Youth/Young Adults Ministries: Explore ways to pool resources and coordinate programs, recruit effective leaders, develop age-appropriate communications platforms and organize events that inspire this age group to participate
- Religious Education: To engage the clergy and laity to discern ways we lead people to Christ in a way that supports each individual's life-long journey.
- Multiculturalism/Diversity: Assess challenges and opportunities for multicultural and ethnic parishes, discern needs, develop plans to be more inclusive and supportive.

These are but a few examples, certainly not exhaustive. Others will be discerned from listening to our stakeholders.



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These commissions will kick off in the fall. The fruits of their work will eventually become part of a master plan for the Fall River Diocese. The success of this process will require the participation of a wide representation of our Diocesan Church. It is my prayer that more than 1,000 will participate!

III: RESTORE SUPPORT FOR CLERGY

“Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way.’ I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the Bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.”

Pope Francis
Evangelii Gaudium

Recent feedback from our pastors revealed concerns about a lack of collegiality, a lack of transparency, feelings of isolation, and a greater need for the pastors — and parishioners — to lend their voices to this planning.

The Pastoral Planning Report also echoed this con-

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cern: that pastors are overburdened, at times overwhelmed, and unable to be “priests” because of administrative responsibilities. It is expected that the strategic planning commissions will address the administration of our parishes and offer solutions.

In the meantime our strategic planning should immediately address the collegiality of our priests, as well as the issue of “subsidiarity” — a Catholic notion that has taken over many a modern organization: decisions that can be taken at a lower level should not be kicked up to people who know less about the local situation.



Subsidiarity calls for more collaborative decision-making at the parish level, and empowering our pas-

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tors to be confident and inspiring members of a team. I have begun the important process of communicating directly with the priests in small groups. In addition, we are offering:

1. Pastoral Leadership Initiatives — Pending the feedback of the initial class of *Good Leaders Good Shepherds*, the program or another similar one may be offered to all priests in the Diocese. I will convene a committee to evaluate and recommend other programs to address specific issues such as administration, preaching, Liturgy, etc.

2. Ministry to Priests — In collaboration with Boston College, our Diocese will be the first to offer a comprehensive and multi-phased approach in caring for our priests — Spirit, mind and body. Together with Boston College, the Jesuits have created programs that will

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focus on physical, spiritual and emotional health.



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As we celebrate the joy of Easter, I ask you to keep the success of our planning in your prayers and I promise to keep you informed about each next step. Please pray about what it is that God may be calling you to — and the important role you may play in this entire planning effort. Real transformation — at both the local and larger-Church levels — will happen, only if we are all together, leading the way.

May God bless us on this journey in *Rebuilding in Faith and Hope!*

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Edgar M. da Cunha".

Most Reverend Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V.
Bishop of Fall River

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